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## **Aging bodies and desistance from crime: Insights from the life stories of offenders**

**Andrew C. Sparkes (Leeds Beckett University) & Jo day (Exeter University)**

### **Abstract**

The transition from crime to desistance and the role the aging body plays in this process has received little empirical scrutiny in the criminological literature. In this article, therefore, we seek to unpack and flesh out the meanings associated with the aging body for those involved in desistance. We draw on data from a larger study that examined the experiences of adults in England who had made successful transformations and desisted from crime, those who were trying to do so, and those who were struggling with this task. Our analysis of life story interviews conducted with these adults revealed the following key themes: the ambiguity of age; crime is a young persons game; tiredness; risk assessment, missing out and lost time. The nuanced ways in which each of these might operate to instigate a movement away from criminal activity and towards desistance is considered in detail. Our findings suggest that in order to better understand the dynamics of desistance that greater attention needs to be paid to the the aging body in criminal justice settings and that this project would benefit from collaborative efforts by those working in the fields of criminology, body studies and aging studies.

**Keywords:** aging, body, crime, desistance, life story

### **Introduction**

According to McNeil, Farrall, Lightowler, and Maruna (2012) desistance from crime involves 'the long-term abstinence from criminal behaviour among those for whom offending has become a pattern of behaviour' (p. 3). They note that producing or

encouraging desistance is the implicit focus of much criminal justice policy, research and practice, and it is identified as one of the key outcomes that justice interventions are designed to achieve. Accordingly, much research treats reducing or ending offending as a key measure of effectiveness. This said, McNeil and his colleagues point out, 'there is little agreement on the definition and measurement of desistance from crime. Some see desistance as a permanent cessation of offending over several years, whilst others take an arguably more fluid definition of desistance, accepting that episodes of re-offending may occur' (p. 3). There is, however, some agreement that desistance is best viewed as a process rather than a state (i.e., an abrupt cessation of criminal behaviour) and that it is not an irreversible transition. It can be considered a "zigzag" and "curved" path with crime and non-crime cycles and combines stopping and staying stopped (Carlsson, 2012; Ezell, 2007; Leibrich, 1993; Kazemian & Maruna, 2009; Shapland & Bottom, 2011). Desistance from crime, therefore, can best be conceptualised as a dynamic, non-linear, on-going process that can involve lapses and relapses.

Various theoretical explanations have been provided for desistance from crime. One of these is the *maturational reform* theory that evolved from the pioneering work of Harvard Criminologists Glueck and Gleuck (1937) who, having studied criminality across the life course, stated that aging was the only factor to emerge as significant in the reformatory process and that the gradual movement away from crime with age as maturation or maturational reform. This theory focuses on the links between age and the 'growing out' or 'burn out' from crime due to time and maturation, and emphasises the psychosocial and physiological maturation processes considered crucial in leading to 'dampening' effects on crime participation.

Despite its early appeal, the work of the Gluecks came under heavy criticism. For example, Wootton (1962) argued that their version of maturation theory posited law-like or mechanical process of the criminal career, and that their explanations were circular (once a person stops offending, they have reached maturity). Thus, it is not an explanation but a description of something that needs to be explained. Such critiques led to the demise of this theory. Rocque (2014) notes, however, that while certain aspects of the critique were well founded, the Glueck's theory is more viable than many realise.

For example, the notion of “maturational reform” is not necessarily tautological (they did attempt to define maturation independently of criminal behavior). In addition, their notion of maturation seemingly foresaw several developments in criminology, cognitive psychology, and neurological sciences that have recently helped to advance our understanding of behavioral change in adulthood. (Rocque, 2014, p. 4)

According to Rocque (2014) while the literature on desistance from crime has increased significantly since the Glueck’s time, the theories or explanations that have emerged each contain elements of what may be called maturation. The most obvious of these is what Rocque calls ‘pure age-based theories’ that offer explanations of the age-crime curve based solely on age as a factor. For example, Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) and Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that age directly impacts on crime in that crime declines with age. For them, this robust variable suggests a natural and direct effect that occurs regardless of other circumstances and cannot be explained by any cultural, social or psychological factors. In view of this, such theories do not feel inclined to consider social or institutional processes nor do they feel the need to reflect on the subjective meanings of age for those concerned (Maruna, 2001). Rocque (2014) also points out the following.

The implication of the “pure-age” perspective on desistance is that maturational reform is “normative” in that it happens for everyone and it happens at generally the same rate. Thus, factors that vary across individuals (such as social relationships) do not have a significant impact on behavioral reform. As such, these theories remain unsatisfactory in helping to understand desistance. (Rocque, 2014, p. 5)

In direct contrast to pure age and maturational reform theories are what might be classed as social relationship, social role and life transition theories. Included here would be the leading proponents of social control theory, Sampson and Laub (1993), who believe that social bonds provide individuals with a stake in conformity and a reason to avoid crime. For them, social processes such as, work, marriage, and involvement in education, military or religious institutions provide key turning points in the life course and are central to explaining changes in criminality over time.

In developing their age-graded life-course theory Laub & Sampson (2003) came to view desistance as a complex process occurring over time that depends on structured routine activities (e.g. employment, associating with law-abiding peers), social controls (bonds with family and friends), and human agency. Thus, desistance resides in the interface of developing personal maturity, changing social bonds associated with certain life transitions and the individual subjective narratives and identity (McNeill, 2006). Supporting this view, Massagolia and Uggen (2010) argue that marriage, employment, *and* desistance from criminal activity are part of traditional adult status markers, while Carlsson (2012) confirms that processes of 'family formation, stable employment, the disintegration of peer groups and subjective shifts in identity are changes that tend to emerge at certain stages in the life and have been shown to be important for understanding changes in offending' (p. 1).

Samson and Laub (1993) acknowledge that the mechanisms underlying the relationships between social ties and desistance are not well understood and precisely why, for example, marriage and employment should reduce crime is unknown (Laub and Sampson, 2003, Sampson et al., 2006). Reflecting on such issues in relation to the centrality of turning points in desistance from crime, Carlsson (2012) comments as follows.

A turning point thus constitutes a change in the life course, which, in turn, constitutes a change in the individual's offending. It is not employment, marriage, military service, residential change or other changes in themselves that bring about desistance, but rather the way such changes under certain circumstances can bring about other changes, which are theoretically understood as central for the desistance processes to emerge. (Carlsson, 2012, p. 3)

These 'other changes' that Carlsson (2012) alludes to are the focus of attention of what Rocque (2014) describes as cognitive transformation, agency, and identity theories. These theories are cognitive-based, subjective explanations of how individuals change their outlook on themselves with desistance occurring when offenders no longer regard themselves as criminals (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Rungay, 2004). For example, Maruna (2001) points to the importance of self-

identity in the desistance process and argues that 'to desist from crime, ex-offenders need to develop a coherent, pro-social identity for themselves' (p. 7). This involves a cognitive re-scripting in which individuals reshape their perceptions of their past selves in order to conform to who they believe they are now. As part of this process, identity changes or cognitive shifts may result that lead to the individual to purposefully pursue differently lines of behavior that can ultimately lead to desistance. In relation to Maruna's work, Rocque (2014) notes that it also demonstrates that identity is not entirely an internal phenomenon, but one that is shaped by outside factors.

According to Rocque (2014), the most compelling identity theory has been offered by Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002). They suggest that the environment provides what they describe as a 'scaffolding' or 'hooks for change' that can facilitate desistance but emphasize that ultimately the individual must do the work. In outlining their four-part model of cognitive transformation, Giordano et al. argue that the desistance process involves the following: a 'general cognitive openness to change'; exposure and reaction to 'hooks for change' or turning points; the envisioning of an appealing and conventional 'replacement self'; and a transformation in the way the actor views deviant behaviour. For Rocque (2014) this theory of cognitive transformation and other identity theories that emphasise individual changes as the major cause of desistance suggest that rather than external forces leading to behavioural reform, it is psychosocial changes in how offenders see themselves as well as how they view criminal behaviour that affects desistance. Such views, put the focus on human agency or choice in the desistance process. He notes, however, that without social supports, 'it remains unclear whether identity change in isolation is enough to promote desistance' (p. 7).

As our brief review of desistance theories indicates, no one theory is able to offer the complete solution to the desistance problem. According to Rocque (2014), each is limited because of the tendency to concentrate on one component of development over the life course. He also notes that these 'explanations are also generally presented as mutually exclusive and competing, which has thus far impeded a more complete understanding of a complex and nuanced phenomenon' (p.15). Against this backdrop, Rocque advocates the use of theoretical frameworks

that operate across disciplines to generate explanations of desistance that are multi-faceted and integrative

Desistance from crime is likely to be related to changes in social relationships, changes in attitudes and identity, changes in views of the self, and biological processes. All of these factors form what I see as maturation in terms of behavioral change. They all, importantly, represent changes that occur during the transition to adulthood. Importantly, there has been a trend toward recognizing that desistance may require integrated theorizing, where factors on several levels of analysis are viewed as important. (Roque, 2014, p. 15)

In keeping with the trend identified by Rocque (2014), the issue of age would seem worthy of attention because it weaves its way either implicitly or explicitly throughout the theories described above. Age remains statistically one of the most robust findings in the criminological literature in that for most people, criminal behaviour peaks in their teenage years and then starts to decline. This is not to suggest, however, that the age-crime relationship is invariant or a 'settled law' because, as Ulmer and Steffensmeier (2014) remind us, 'the age-crime curve appears to vary in its specific features according to crime types, the structural position of groups, and historical and cultural contexts' (p. 394). Furthermore, as McNeill *et al.* (2012) point out:

Although age remains among the best predictors of desistance, this theory has not stood up well to the tests of time. More recent evidence suggests that these explanations fail to 'unpack' the meaning of age ... Age includes a range of different components (biological changes, social transitions, and life experiences). For age to be a meaningful explanation of social behaviour, according to this argument, we need to ask which features are the ones mediating behaviour in this process labeled as aging. (p. 4)

Since Shover's (1986) seminal US study *Aging Criminals*, some empirical attention has been given to the experiences of aging men and women in prison within England and Wales (Crawley and Sparks, 2005; 2006; Mann, 2013; Wahidin, 2004). It remains however, that further work is needed to explicitly unpack

or flesh out the meaning of age in relation to desistance in ways that might contribute to an increased understanding of what Rocque (2014) describes as a 'complex and nuanced phenomenon' (p.15).

Given that insufficient attention has been given to how those involved in crime actually construct the meanings of age in relation to their criminal careers and how this might inform the process of desistance, we believe this to be the first article that seeks to unpack and flesh out the multiple meanings of age by drawing on the life stories of offenders. In this unpacking we foreground issues pertaining to the subjective experience of aging and desistance, and as part of the fleshing out we acknowledge the significance of the body in this process. This is necessary as issues relating to the body and embodiment have received little attention in the criminological literature and have been particularly neglected in studies of desistance. Our concern with embodiment is also in keeping with Twigg's (2004) suggestion that writing about the body must be a central task for critical gerontologists.

We need to give weight to the complexity and plurality of social and cultural meanings that have and do adhere to the bodily, recognizing the ways in which the body and bodily experience are constituted. And yet at the same time we need to recognize how these discourses are formed and take shape in a dialectical relationship with real bodies. (Twigg, 2004, p. 70).

Others have also stressed that aging is an embodied process. For example, Tulle (2008) notes the centrality to any understanding of aging and how the body 'is always present and it is always used in some way by aging social actors and those around them' (p. ix). For her, a key task is to understand how social actors are embodied and embody themselves, how the aging body is given meaning in specific contexts, and with what outcomes. Likewise, Katz (2011) points out that while we have bodies that age, we also have 'embodied lives whereby we create subjective phenomenological dimensions of meaning and identity. As embodied subjects, we are reflexively bound to make intelligible the physical changes and passages of life through which we experience living in time' (p. 188). In view of this, he argues for a perspective of *embodied aging* that explores the coalescence of physical and biographical ageing in ways that acknowledge the aging body as both 'creator and



product of the experiences configured by our material worlds, such as the spaces we live in and environments in which we move' (p. 188). With these points in mind we now move on to discuss how we gathered life history data from a small group of people regarding their embodied experiences of aging and desistance from crime.

## Methodology

The data in this article are drawn from a larger study that examined the experiences of adults in England who had transformed their criminal lives, constructed a pro-social life and identity, desisted from crime, and the role that sport and physical activity played in this process (name of author). This involved seeking the life stories told by those who had made successful transformations and desisted from crime, those who were trying to do so, and those who were struggling with this task. Atkinson (2002) defines the life story as follows.

A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what the person wants to remember of it and what he or she wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another. The resulting life story is the narrative essence of what has happened to the person. It can cover the time from birth to the present or before and beyond. It includes the important events, experiences, and feelings of a lifetime ... A life story gives us a vantage point from which to see how one person experiences and understands life, his or her own especially, over time (pp. 125-126)

For Atkinson (2007) there may be no equal to the life story interview for revealing more about the inner life of the person in terms of how they see themselves at this and other points in their lives, and how they want others to see them. In considering the life story as a resource, Plummer (2001) notes that besides its ability access subjectivities and meanings, that life stories always involve a dual focus on history as it is concerned with time *in* the life and time *outside* the life. The former is how the life is lived over phases, careers, cycles, and stages. The latter is how historical moments play a role in shaping individual lives. Plummer also points out that life stories are 'peculiarly suited to discovering the confusions, ambiguities and contradictions that are played out in everyday experiences' (p. 40).

He adds that this approach is very useful for those seeking to get a sense of the totality of a life as it necessarily weaves 'biological needs, immediate social groups, personal definitions of the situation, and historical change both in one's own life and in the outside world' (p. 40).

Following university ethical approval, access was negotiated to four prisons in the south west of England. Access was also negotiated to Probation Service team members, also in the south west, who were involved in supervising and supporting people who are serving sentences in the community. Gaining access was facilitated by virtue of the fact that the one of the authors (name) had previously been employed as a forensic psychologist and, therefore, was afforded a level of credibility and trust by those within the prison and probation services.

The participants that were located in prison or on a probation license were recommended after discussion with prison and probation staff about the study and their recommendations on who they thought could assist and they supported an initial introduction either by letter or in person. The second author explained what the study involved to each participant, shared an information sheet about the research, answered questions and gained a sense of their interest in taking part.

To locate people to speak to who were no longer involved in criminal activity a prison service colleague of the second author facilitated an introduction to one participant who worked for a charity that supported people with criminal convictions and was aware they had served a few long prison sentences and had been crime-free for a number of years. This participant recommended and provided an introduction to another person they knew and thought would be interested in taking part in our study. We also contacted six charities that support people who have criminal convictions asking if they were aware of anyone who may be interested in taking part and two responded which led to introductions to three further participants.

Prior to meeting each participant an information sheet was emailed or assisted explanation of the study over the phone. During the first meeting the purpose and what was involved in taking part in the research was explained along with provision of an information sheet. No incentives were offered for taking part and many of the participants said they volunteered in the hope that their experiences may help others to change. An informed consent form was signed and or consent was verbally recorded. Participants were offered the opportunity to be given a copy

of their recordings and interview transcripts. To aid confidentiality participants were invited to choose pseudonyms of which four did and the rest were content for us to choose.

From the available population, purposeful and snowball sampling, were used to select 16 people who have criminal convictions and served at least one prison sentence from the following categories for a series of life story interviews that, in total, lasted 98 hours. These participants had been involved in 'street' offending such as violence, drug dealing, theft rather than serious organised crime, fraud, or sexual offences

*“Ex-offenders” (n=6):* Persons living in the community and made the transition to a pro-social lifestyle and no recorded or self-reported crime for at least one year. These are Simon, Christine, Jack, Andrew, Eliza, and Tom (all names are pseudonyms)

*“Stuck” (N=2):* Persons not currently making the transition and active in a criminal lifestyle. These were likely to be in prison or on probation license/order. These are Rebecca and John.

*“Trying” and “Transition” (N=8):* Persons currently trying to transform in the community, or just about to be released from prison, on probation license/order and followed up in the community. These are Mark, Sam, Dean, Jamie, Stuart (trying), Jason, Ryan, and Ben (transition).

Interviews were conducted at times and places convenient to the participants. These included local cafes, the participants' work place, a probation office, motorway service station, an allotment and a prison gym office. The early interviews involved the participants sharing their life story with us. Here, they were encouraged to tell us about their lives in their own way and in their own terms. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim following the guidance of Crossley (2000) and Flick (2009) in producing a readable full transcript of the interview including questions and answers.

Atkinson (2007) suggests that the life story interview can be seen as a natural bridge between the disciplines using narrative inquiry methodologies; between the

telling and living of a narrative; and between the whole and the parts of the life being narrated. Accordingly, the transcripts were subjected to various forms of narrative analysis described by Phoenix, Smith and Sparkes (2010) and Riessman (2008). One of these was a thematic analysis that focused on the content of what was being said. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) this first involved familiarizing ourselves with the data by listening to the interviews several times. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and subjected to several readings during which ideas and connections were noted down. Next, initial codes were generated for each individual interview. Building on this, themes relating to desistance were identified, reviewed and refined both within and across the interviews provided by those involved in the study. These themes were then explored further with participants in follow-up interviews.

One of the themes identified in the life stories was that of aging. Accordingly, in the follow-up interviews the participants were asked about how they viewed themselves and their age. This involved asking questions such as: How do you feel about yourself at the age you are now? What has changed for you as you have got older? What has stayed the same for you as you have got older? How has getting older influenced your views on getting involved in crime? The responses to such questions were then subjected to a further thematic analysis. The key themes that emerged from this process will now be explored in detail.

## **Results**

### ***The ambiguity of age***

Age was an ambiguous concept in the stories told by our participants about their criminal lives and any attempts to desist. In temporal terms, like the prisoners described by Jamieson and Grounds (2005) and Martos, Sparkes, and Devis (2009), our participants experiences of imprisonment tended to be framed in terms of managing time, such as 'doing time' 'passing time' 'occupying time' 'killing time' and 'serving time'. Our participants also spoke of 'time standing still' when they were in prison. In relation to this time category they acknowledged that for many offenders,

their chronological age often did not match their maturational age, with the latter being consistently classed as lower than the former. As Eliza responded when asked about this discrepancy:

That's an interesting question 'cause it's like kind of time stands still when you're in there. You don't age at all when you're in there. I've noticed that with a lot of us, everybody. And a lot of people that spend a long time in prison don't seem to either have matured or developed. And a lot of people look exactly the same. It's like going into some sort of time-free zone. I don't know what it is. You don't feel like you're ageing. It's like time stands still.

On the same issue, Jason observed that, 'they say you leave jail right the same age that you come in'. Not surprisingly, therefore, many participants experienced difficulties in responding to the question: 'How old do you feel at the moment? As Eliza commented:

I don't know that's really hard to say. Because ... my twenties up to say a couple of years ago I just felt of a young age. I couldn't put an age on it. I didn't feel any different at that time. And now, I think I'm supposed to feel different because I've realised that actually age has caught up with me. And I am, you know, I'm sort of in the bracket as well, I should almost be a Grandmother soon, and that to me is like really quite scary. Doesn't seem to fit me, and I don't feel like I belong in that bracket yet. So I don't really know quite where I belong at the moment.

In terms of their age awareness, several of the participants involved in the heavy use of illegal Class 'A' drugs (e.g. heroin), noted how this impacted upon them to distort their views of age-related time. As Sam commented:

I still feel like I'm sort of back in my twenties where I've been controlled by the drugs for all them years. ... Missed out on a lot of, I don't know, normal life I suppose. So yeah I don't feel that age [his current age]'cause I haven't really properly grown up ... 'cause all I've done is just spent time in and out of prison

... and just taking drugs and ... being in and out of prison or being under the influence of heroin.

Dean also described feeling younger than his actual age and the role that drug use, alongside periods of imprisonment, might have played in this process.

I feel like sometimes as if I'm, I don't know, 22, 23 again ... I lose myself sometimes and I sort of got to catch myself and think, 'Wait a minute, you're 35 years old now.' I do that quite a few times, I would get that sort of thought. ... I suppose 'cause of all the lost years I've had from sentences and drugs and that. Where I've either been in a six by four (a prison cell) or I've been out my head. I assume my brain's sort of shut down parts of my life you, and then when I got out again I sort of reboot itself from that period. So I think I lost years and I think my mental age is a bit younger than what it should be really, where it's still trying to catch up to where I am.

Others like for Ben, Ryan, Rebecca, Sam and Dean commented on how their time in prison acted to institutionalise and infantilise them. By this they meant that everything was done for them in prison. As Mark stated, for much of his prison life this has meant 'Having my arse wiped for me'. Accordingly, they felt little sense of personal agency in terms of being able to control events and do things for themselves, and they believed that they were functioning emotionally and behaviourally at a lower age than their actual chronological age.

For those early in their transformation process there was a shift in what they most valued in life. Mark described how, having taken part in a rehabilitation programme in prison that 'things started clicking' in his head. This included not caring so much about his public image and no longer feeling comfortable in prison. He linked this to growing up and achieving adulthood: 'It's just me, I've grown up. I feel like I've grown up. For such a long period of time I was always stuck in that 16, 17, 18 year old mode in my head. And now I feel an adult'.

Mark linked it to feeling, 'like a man' and being, 'free' from his, 'hard man image'. Having, 'had enough' and, 'wasted his life', he explained he was on the verge of finding out what he wants, what matters to him in life, who he is and who he

wants to be as a person. Ben recalled making a conscious decision to transform in prison and just 'grew up':

I'm tired of putting on a brave front and telling everyone it is okay when it's not. It's a jacket full of lies. When I was going behind my door my head was falling off 'cause I was sitting there thinking, 'I can't do this no more'. And I did just put my hands up and said, 'You know what? You've won.' I come straight to that age where I grew up. I just grew up. I just said I'm not a child anymore. I'm 36 now. Yet I've been institutionalised since I was 7. You know what I mean, 7 to 16 in boarding school, 16 to 36 I've been in prison. I've done one thing one way for far too long. And I'm done with it. I'm absolutely done with it.

The participants in our study recognised the difference between maturational age and chronological age. Many of them further recognised that in terms of the markers associated with what Massoglia and Uggen (2010) call *behavioural* adult status (e.g., getting married, gaining full-time employment) that they were behind others their age. Likewise, in terms of their *subjective* adult status that involves self-perceptions regarding the extent to which offenders feel like adults and whether they feel 'on time' or 'off time' with regard to the social clock in making particular transitions, the majority in our study signalled they were 'off time' and lagging behind others their own age. 'Doing time', therefore, is seen to impede the transition to adulthood in a generalised sense.

Rocque (2014) points out that 'criminal justice system contact may delay maturation' (p. 13). Alongside this, Marks' blunt statement earlier also indicates that offenders are aware incarceration per se can act to inhibit both behavioural and subjective movement towards adult status by reducing them to the helpless and dependent status of childhood. As Massoglia and Uggen (2010) comment, 'Both delinquency and official sanctions, however, can disrupt adult role transitions, and those subject to such sanctions are well aware of this fact' (p. 551). In many ways, our participants, like those described by Wiersma and Dupois (2010) in long-term care homes, become institutional bodies via a socialization process that includes placing the body, defining the body, focusing on the body, managing the body, and relating to the body. Here, the body, both as inscribed and disciplined by the institution as well as experienced by the individual, is not only the primary site for the

socialization processes into the criminal justice system, but is also the end result of the socialization processes.

This said, it is important to note that incarceration might not have solely negative effects on maturation. For example, Jason said he felt free from his previous association with gangs and that he does not, 'owe anything to anybody'. He believed that going to prison played a key role in his maturation as a person:

Yeah it's hard to put into words really but ... massively changed, made me feel so much more mature. It's coming back to I know what I want now. Back then if you said to me two years ago, 'Jason what do you want?' Two years ago I would have said, 'Oh, fucking millionaire, be the biggest drug dealer in the world.' Something cocky and fucking stupid like that. If you ask me now I'll give you a sensible, achievable answer. That was two years ago when I was sort of immature.

As Rocque (2014) notes, the effect of incarceration can vary according to whether the facility focuses on rehabilitation and that some treatment programmes, such as those that focus on employment and social skills building may actually increase social role maturation. Several of our participants did not see prison as a place capable of supporting their maturation and desistance from crime. This was particularly so for those who had served multiple sentences.

### **The aging body**

The outward appearance, capabilities, and feelings of the physical body in relation to age were frequently raised by the participants during interview. From this the following three themes emerged: criminal activity is for young people; tiredness; and slowing down.

### ***Crime is a 'young persons' game'***

According to Andrews (2014), 'Watching those around us, and watching them watching us, is the way many come to experience their own aging' (p. 51). Reflecting back on how he viewed older people in prison when he was younger, Mark stated, 'I



just used to say I'm never going to be like that, no way am I. No way am I going to be in prison that old.' Jamie supports this view, 'But when you're in prison you see people like 38, 40, and you think, "I'll never be in jail when I'm that old.'" Likewise, Rebecca commented, 'I'm 34, I don't want to end up like some of the people I see. You know, old women still on the gear (drugs) and that. I don't want that. I just want to sort myself out'. Such views are supported by Sam when he looked back on his younger self in prison.

I can remember thinking to myself 'I don't want to be in here at that age. 'Definitely, I can remember just thinking to myself, 'I don't want to be coming back here.' 'Which I did for a little while, end up going back for a couple of small stretches. And then found myself being in prison and everyone being a lot younger and me thinking to myself, 'Bloody hell I was doing this 20 years ago.'

These comments signal that our participants inhabit what Waskul and Vannini (2006) describe as 'looking-glass bodies'. Such bodies, with its clear resonances with Cooley's (1902) 'looking-glass self', imagines what it looks to self, what it looks like to others, and how others will judge what they see. Importantly, as the comments by Rebecca and Jamie indicate, the participants in our study gazed upon the bodies of others in the prison setting and interpreted what they observed in terms of age appropriate categories. Simultaneously, they also recognised that their own aging bodies are subject to the gaze of others and their interpretations. Importantly, as Waskul and Vannini point out, the looking-glass body is not a direct reflection of other's judgements. Rather it is an *imagined* reflection built on cues gleaned from others. This imagined reflection, as Bytheway and Johnson (1998) point out, is based on the sight of age that requires a well-developed sense of what constitutes the image of an old person and the ability to interpret the signs available on the exterior of the physical body.

In talking about the everyday visibility of the aging body Gubrium and Holstein (2003) note that its characteristics are confidently read from bodily composition, configuration, and suppleness, among many other apparently 'unmistakable' signs. They emphasize that such characteristics 'form the foundation for attributed personhood that is necessary for everyday interaction' (p. 207). This raises questions as to

how precisely our participants come to recognise age in the sight of their own mirroring bodies and those of others and how this impacts on the social relations between offenders in prison settings. It also raises questions about how offenders socially manage the objective presence of their aging body and its meaningful visibility in prison setting and with what effect.

The comments from our participants as looking-glass bodies also indicate they hold certain narrative maps of aging in the context of a criminal career that may be consequential for how they relate to the future. As Phoenix and Sparkes (2006) point out, these narrative maps by providing a preview of what is to come, can portray features of the aging process in positive or negative terms which increase or reduce anxiety, motivation, and morale depending on what is portrayed as awaiting the traveler on the journey to come. This can contribute to socialization and social reproduction by confirming cultural stereotypes of aging and forms of embodiment or, alternatively, acting to challenge and problematize these stereotypes. Regarding the former Neikrug (2003) argues that for younger individuals, 'internalized negative stereotypes of aging can support ageist attitudes, affect their relationships with older persons in their lives as well as causing worry about their own future' (p. 327).

Phoenix and Sparkes (2006) further note that narrative maps may also shape the actions of the young people who draw upon them by directing them toward certain areas and activities and away from others, and by specifying preparations in the present necessary for effective action in the future' (p. 110). This would seem to be significant if being an older, and 'unsuccessful' (i.e., in material terms) offender in prison is afforded low status and stigmatised by younger people in prison. For Sam, this negative social comparison of age categories was a central issue in his decision to desist from crime.

The last one (prison sentence) was probably about a year and a half ago I suppose. I just thought to myself ... you're too old. Too old for this, being in prison again and seeing all the younger people ... So last prison sentence I just thought, 'I've got to stop. Enough is enough.' Felt too old for it and I had enough of just going to prison basically ... Too old for this. I don't want to be doing this still.

Such comments raise questions about what might constitute 'successful aging' for offenders in criminal justice settings, how this is achieved, and the consequences for those who are deemed as 'unsuccessful' in the process. These questions are particularly pertinent if, as Laz (2003) suggests, age is a phenomenon we (individually and collectively) work at making meaningful (in general and particular) through various interactions that are framed in the context of institutions and social structures. Thus, age for the participants in our study is an accomplishment that they perform constantly as they simultaneously give meanings to their own age, to other ages and age in general within the prison setting. Following Laz, greater attention needs to be given to the prison as a social setting and contexts in which offenders 'act their age' either successful or unsuccessfully and to the variety of resources that they draw on, use, and/or transform in the process of this accomplishment.

### ***Tiredness***

In their study of the body, health and self in the middle years Cunningham-Burley and Backett-Milburn (1998) noted that their participants found it difficult to identify strong points about their body because these did not routinely require reflection or attention. They are literally 'unremarkable'. In contrast they found identifying and talking about the weak points of their body much easier because they more easily assert themselves and communicate their presence through pain of other unpleasant sensations that are directly and obviously experienced in the body. Talking of the communicating body, Cunningham-Burley and Backett-Milburn stressed that it is change or difference that demands attention and they pointed to how the participants in their study often drew on notions of change associated with the aging body. For our participants, beside changes in physical appearance as discussed earlier in relation to the looking-glass body, the other broad categories drawn on were alterations in energy and strength, and the occurrence of aches and pains. They commonly spoke of, tiredness, lack of energy and loss of strength in relation to the aging process. In so doing, they signalled the somatic presence of the phenomenological body as described by Waskul and Vannini (2006) and the ways in which it acts as a fundamental corporeal anchor for them in the prison setting.

In terms of feeling too old to be in prison, a number of the participants in our study acknowledged the simple fact of *tiredness*. As Mark stated, 'It's stupid. Just wish I'd done this a long time ago. That's the way I look at it' and 'I'm tired of it. I am tired of all this bollocks. I wish I could just go back and shake myself 20 years ago.' Mark's acknowledgement of feeling 'tired' of it all signals the centrality of the corporeal body with limited physical and emotional resources, as a marker of time and age for offenders when considering desistance. Likewise, Tom, described how physically he was, 'Dying on his feet' prior to making his decision to change and desist from crime. The body is implicated in how he reflected on his current age.

Tom: The war's over. I've lived half my life now I think, you know. Do you know what I mean? Like I'm 35. 36 this year. Means if I live to 70 I would have considered myself to have a good innings. So I'm at halfway already. If I live to more than 70, then great.

(author): Do you feel your age then?

Tom: I do. I feel, lately I've been feeling like these knocks and, my body feels ... done in. Do you know what I mean? This shoulder feels done in. This shoulder's hurting where the cold's seeping in, where it's been dislocated. Sometimes I feel like I'm a bloody old man just moaning, and moaning, and moaning.

Like Tom, Jamie also linked a growing awareness of his own aging to the physical condition of his body and its ability to perform when he was doing his last five-year sentence in prison: 'I remember hurting my ankle playing football and I remember the doctor saying, 'You're getting old now. You're getting old you're body takes longer to recover.' And it's not nice is it? But it happens to everyone doesn't it? So it's life isn't it?' Such comments resonate with those middle-aged people in Cunningham-Burley and Backett- Milburn (1998) study where 'everyday morbidity was often talked about in terms of ageing, with aches and pains being seen as more common and the healing process slower than when they were younger' (p. 155). Such comments also connect to the narrative maps held by young athletes interviewed by Phoenix and Sparkes (2006) about what their bodies would be like in

middle age. For them, this included decreases in agility, speed and strength, as well as increases in recovery time from exercise and an increased likelihood of injury and pain as they aged.

Embodied turning point moments, such as Tom's painful shoulder, were recognised by the participants our study as directly signalling to them that they were 'not getting any younger'. For some, this led to a re-evaluation of how they treated their body and a coming to terms with their aging as a process. This is evident in the following comment by Christine when she talks about embracing aging.

Do you know what? It's funny, I was talking about that with my sister yesterday. I was saying that I'm starting to embrace my age. Right. 'Cause it's sort of like that when I come into recovery and when I've come off drugs, still wanting to be what you're not. Still trying to keep yourself young. There's nothing wrong with keeping yourself young but for me it was trying to pretend I was something that I wasn't. So I'm embracing my age today and I'm trying to look after what I've got now. Trying to look after what I have.

Embracing one's age, acknowledging the need to take care of oneself, suggest that Christine, like several of our participants, has begun to develop a different relationship to her body than the one she had previously as a youthful offender. Her comments also signal a new appreciation of the importance of her body and its changes. All of which, has implications for how she constructs her current sense of self as a desisting ex-offender, as well as her sense of self in the past (offender) and in the future (desisting ex-offender).

### ***Slowing down***

As Twigg (2004) reminds us, 'aging forces us to engage with physiology' (p. 63). This engagement was evident when our participants talked about diminished performance capacities, and the ability to recover quickly from physical exertion. In relation to their youthful bodies they also spoke of their bodies slowing down as they aged. For some, this recognition provided an opportunity to consider transforming their life and desisting from crime. Mark stated that his decision to change was age-related. When asked what he meant by this he explained as follows.

When you get older I think you calm down a lot, you seem to want to kick back a lot. You start realising you're wasting your life and stuff. There's more to life when you get older I think. I think that's how to explain it. You chill out more don't you? Instead of watching East Enders (TV soap programme) you want to watch something on animals or something like that. I don't know, that's how I put a thing on it.

John who is still active in crime also mentioned a change in outlook that was age-related. For him there has mentally been, 'A bit of a shift'. He 'feels more drained' and 'looks at things differently now'. He shared, 'I've just sort of got older and I think a bit deeper.' Reflecting on his behaviour from the ages of 40 to 47 he states that he has, 'Slowed down. Everything has slowed down by then. Even my crime slowed down. I wouldn't go out and break into stately homes when I was this age. I would at that age, when I was younger'.

The notion of slowing down was linked directly to identity changes by the offenders. Eliza described herself now as calmer, a lot quieter but not as spontaneous. She felt her life was 'really settled' into a routine that is comfortable. When asked if she thought these changes were age-related she commented.

Yeah. I think I'm sort of going through that stage at the moment where I'm kind of, trying to work out how sort of how old I really am. Because like if I say it out loud it just doesn't seem to belong to me. But I'm feeling more grown up than I ever have done but I don't know how comfortable I am with it at the moment. I find it quite scary. And I don't know how much that has got to do with also losing my Dad. That has really took the wind out of my sails and I've struggled with that for some time. The whole mortality thing and the ageing process and relating, the ageing process to myself and what that means. I'm finding all that a bit of a struggle at the moment.

As the comments above regarding tiredness and slowing down indicate, the process of ageing as an offender, can force an engagement with the physiological processes of the body and a recognition that, in 'absolute' terms, the physical performance capabilities for committing and certain kinds of crime are likely to

decrease over time. Their comments also suggest that the offenders are implicitly drawing on the notion of 'capability-age' as described by Eman (2012). This involves a reading of age through physical capabilities that are assessed mainly through comparisons of current physical abilities with previous abilities and with the abilities of others. For the participants, as their body changed with age, its physical capabilities declined, and this had a direct bearing on the kinds of crime they could commit, and whether or not they continued to commit crime.

Maruna (2001) described a 'firing up' to desist from crime, from our study there also appears to be a 'winding down'. This finding complements previous studies that identified a 'burning out' process; where the person no longer has the energy to continue with crime and gradually decreases as physically it becomes more difficult to take part in living an active criminal lifestyle (Ward & Laws, 2010). This is pertinent given the types of offences our participants were convicted of in terms of so-called 'street' crime rather than serious sexual or organised crimes.

For Ulmer and Steffensmeier (2014) this leaves us with the intriguing and plausible idea that the link between age and criminal involvement is explained by physical development and aging. For them, however, this is only partially true. They note that, in a general sense, physical abilities, such as strength, speed, prowess, stamina, and aggression, are useful for successful commission of many crimes, for protection, for enforcing contracts, and for recruiting and managing reliable associates.

Although some crimes are more physically demanding than others, persistent involvement in crime is likely to entail a lifestyle that is physically demanding and dangerous. Declining physical strength and energy with age may make crime too dangerous or unsuccessful, especially where there are younger or stronger criminal competitors who will not be intimidated, and thus might help explain the very low involvement in crime of small children and the elderly. Certainly, beyond middle age, aging is associated with notable declines in energy and physical strength. (Ulmer & Steffensmeier, 2014, p. 379)

Having recognized that a reduction in criminal activity can be linked to age related declines in physical capabilities, and that the 'wear and tear' of involvement

in crime and the criminal lifestyle are likely to take their physical toll, Ulmer and Steffensmeier (2014) emphasize this factor should not be viewed in isolation. This is because other factors, such as, offenders may learn that crime does not 'pay', individuals experience age-graded expectations and norms to settle down and 'act your age', and age may be accompanied by a tempering of aspirations and goals due to cumulative life experiences and 'hard knocks', work in combination to foster declining criminal involvement with age, especially for those in their 30s and 40s. This combination of factors in action, they suggest, are likely to be accompanied by biological and psychological processes of aging involving a decline in strength and energy, and changes in decision making.

### **Risk assessment, missing out and lost time**

When they spoke of aging and the process of transformation, a number of the participants noted how, as they got older, they undertook a 'risk assessment' of their lives prior to concluding that the perceived rewards of criminal behaviour were outweighed by the costs. This is evident in the following comment by Simon:

I think it's just knowing how much that there is to lose and just having that focus. Just knowing that as long as I keep on this path [avoiding criminal activity] and I do not stray from this, things should be okay. And it's just not worth the risk. I think there's also an age factor in there as well. You get to an age where you just think, 'It's just not worth it.' I couldn't do another one of those prison sentences again. So there's also that factor as well in the back of the mind. Not something you consciously think about but I'm sure that's a factor as well.

When asked to expand on this 'age factor' Simon explained.

When I was younger and I was involved in the stuff that I was doing, I always knew that there was a danger of ending back in prison and I could end up doing a long prison sentence. In my mind, it's kind of prepared because if you're involved in this [crime] that could happen. You weigh it up and you just think, 'What's the worst thing?' Okay the worst is this, I'll end up doing this



and I'll be out by then'. I don't know if people do that but I always did that. I would calculate it and say this is the kind of risk I'm taking. So, when I weigh up the risk now especially with my family and responsibilities, and it's not even just that, it's the responsibilities. Even in the church and then the people that I'm working with and mentoring, and to see me fall. So there's a lot of responsibility in that sense. And yes, going back to the age thing, there's less chance of recovery at this age now if I was to go and do a 13-year sentence now. What would I do after that?

Simon further reflected on how his risk assessment was informed by him having aspirations and goals for the future:

One of the things for me is not just so much the deterrent factor of you might go to prison for a length of time but having a goal, having a target, having something in the distance which you're aiming towards ... People are more likely to reoffend if they haven't got that because they're not jeopardising anything for them if they go to prison.

Jason also related ageing to a shift in his sense of self, priorities in life and perceptions of risk in terms of reoffending. When asked if he thought that he had changed with age, he responded as follows.

Oh fuck me, yeah ... This last two years has probably put ten years on me mentally if that makes sense. I've been around so many different characters, people and stuff. I was such a div [stupid person] before I went away. I just try and get involved in everything and my priorities were all over the shop. Prior to going away impressing my mates was top. That was top 100 per cent ... My family and my daughter were down the list. Impressions mates, earning money and then just being a prick [idiot] really. Now everything's changed, like just gone upwards. That's switched round. I'm not interested in impressing my mates ... I tell you what scares me. One of my biggest fears is spending forever in jail. That's a big fear that is. Definitely a fear of just not seeing the family, my daughter and stuff like that. Yeah that's scary. So that could be a turning point too.

In talking about the fear of not seeing his family if he is in prison, Jason connects himself to two age-related themes that were raised by other participants. These were 'missing out' and 'lost time'. Having calculated that he had spent 12 of the last 20 years in prison, Dean spoke of 'having nothing to show for it' and seeing these 12 years as 'wasted'. Eliza expressed similar sentiments and also acknowledged a theme common amongst older participants of becoming increasingly aware of their mortality.

For me I've probably become more settled, I'm probably a bit calmer. ... But I don't feel a great deal different. I don't feel old, although I'm aware of my age. I suppose ... I'm more aware of mortality, I'm more aware of illness, I'm more aware that age is creeping up. I've got more aware of the shortness of time ... I suppose now more than I ever have done, I've started to look back on it as a waste of life. I do feel a loss. I feel like I've missed out and again that's only something I've really reflected on in the last year ... So I do kind of feel a bit cheated. A bit like I've lost out and I've missed something.

For some participants, this awareness, of having missed or lost out due to time spent in prison frames their expectations of 'future time' in terms of attempting to change towards pro-social behaviours and 'making something' of their life. As Jamie articulated in responding to a question about how he felt age related to the changes he was trying to make in his life.

I think with age, I've grown out of all the madness. I'd had enough ... But when you're in prison you see people like 38, 40, and you think, 'I'll never be in jail when I'm that old.' I suppose I'm just scared of being old and in prison cause it means you got nothing in life have you? ... Means you haven't made it really. Made nothing of your life ... I ain't going to be like that.

Christine described her awareness of time running out to make changes in her life in ways that benefited her children. When asked if age played a part in her desire to change, she stated.

Like drugs and heroin at the teenage years, and that chaotic life from 19 to 34. I knew that my life was to be a Mum, and that it was running out. I knew that I had to do something by the time I'm 40. I didn't put that 40 in my head but inside I knew. That something in me knowing that ... if I don't do something it's the consequences of that for me and for the other two children. Nothing would've changed 'cause they would've been thieves, they would've been drug addicts. ... Anything could've happened to them.

The notion of linear time as a finite resource time that can run out often brought about a feeling of time being condensed and focused in which to make change. Mark, currently in prison, expressed this focused view and because of this felt that 'now is the time' for him to change. He states, 'Now it's about me wanting it. You know I'm 34, just time to hang up my boots, that's how I see it. It's never got me nowhere. I wouldn't say I've got pocket loads of money out there and a big house. I've got absolutely nothing'.

The age-related experiences of risk assessment provided above provide an insight into how this influences the process of desistance. . Such risk-related concerns are similar to Shover's (1985) study of ageing men, forty-years plus, who had committed property crimes in America. He reported personal shifts due to age and becoming more settled and responsible. This entailed a shift in aspirations and goals alongside a growing tiredness of a criminal lifestyle. There was a greater 'pull' of normality and personally meaningful ties to conventional others or activities. Shover proposed the *changed calculus* where the individual has a keener sense of the costs of criminal behaviour. It is the development of new and conventional commitments plus a growing fear of imprisonment that contributes to desistance from crime. Thus, he placed emphasis on a shift in personal outlook and individual agency, rather than the role of external social controls, in choosing not to engage in crime.

The risk assessment theme has resonance with Vaughan's (2007) notion of a *moral conversation* with oneself and the realisation of what really matters and finding a value to life itself. For those earlier in the desistance process the focus is on avoiding contact with the criminal justice system and deprivation of liberty. For those that have been crime-free for longer the concern is having more to lose if they did commit crime having built up a stake in life with regard to relationships, jobs, and a

home. This may also link to fear of death and serious injury given the risks of crime (Ward & Laws, 2010). Our study supports Shover's (1996) finding that the costs of a criminal lifestyle start to outweigh the optimism regarding gains, particularly for those who have been living crime-free for longer. With age, prison sentences are more of a serious threat when older than when younger as the person has more to lose. In particular, not having the time to start over and the perception that opportunities are reducing to live crime-free.

More recently, in reviewing the age and crime relationship and the notion of 'aging out', Ulmer and Sreffensmeier (2014) observed that offenders may gradually learn that crime does not 'pay', and that gains from crime are typically small and not worth the risk or effort. In addition, they suggest, increasingly severe criminal justice penalties for recidivists may finally make crime insufficiently rewarding. Aging offenders are more likely to view incarceration and legal sanctions as more serious threats, 'because they have more to lose than youthful offenders, and as they more fully realize that time is a diminishing and increasingly valuable resource' (p. 391).

## **Discussion**

According to Healy (2014), the processes involved in the transition from crime to desistance has received little empirical scrutiny in the criminological literature and, therefore, remains veiled in mystery. In this article we have sought to play a part in unveiling this mystery by drawing on various theoretical frameworks that operate across disciplines to illuminate the multiple meanings associated with the aging body and how this might impact on the process of desistance from crime. Our findings suggest that with regard to those theories associated with cognitive transformation, agency, and identity reconstruction that how the corporeal body both looks and subjectively feels as it ages within criminal justice settings can provide important turning point moments (Carlsson, 2012) and hooks for change (Giordano et al, 2002, Giordano et al, 2007) that have the potential to instigate a movement away from criminal activity and towards desistance.

The comments from our participants about how, for example, feeling tired and slowing down with age played a part in their decision to desist from crime suggests that greater attention needs to be given to the phenomenological lived body in future studies. This would require careful description of age-related feelings as experienced at the corporeal level of everyday consciousness in criminal justice settings. A focus on the lived experiential body of offenders would, in part, this would meet the call by Lodge and Umberson (2013) for research that increases our understanding of how diverse social groups experience their bodies at different life stages (e.g., midlife) and how these intersect with other social statuses, such as, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and disability. Such a focus would also meet the call by Massoglia and Uggen (2010) to examine in greater depth the subjective dimensions of what it feels like to inhabit an adult body (or not) and how this impacts on desistance. Attending to the phenomenological aging body also has the potential to reveal possible tensions and contradictions that might exist for some offenders in terms of how they subjectively feel in their bodies and how they have to perform their age in relation to the demands of a looking-glass body as perceived by themselves and other offenders.

In calling for greater attention to be given to the body and the processes of embodiment in studies of desistance, we are not proposing that a new theory of desistance should be developed or that a single, unified, theory of this phenomenon is constructed. Given that, just like desistance, the body and experiences of embodiment are layered, nuances, complex and multifaceted these two options are not necessary or desirable. Rather, we are suggesting that future studies of desistance would benefit from criminologists engaging more with somatic turn in the social sciences, and in particular with the various sociologies of the body that have emerged in recent years along with the diverse interests, theories and concepts that they have drawn upon to make sense of how people experience their bodies as simultaneously biological, social, political, and historical (e.g., see Blackman, 2008; Waskul and Vannini, 2006).

According to Ulmer and Sreffensmeier (2014) if we want to understand the age effects of crime, 'we cannot ignore the human organism or his or her environment, physical or social' (p. 394). In view of this, criminologists would also benefit from an engagement with the work of those social and critical gerontologists that have focused their attention on how the aging body is constructed, experienced,

performed and accomplished in everyday contexts and practices (e.g., see Fairclough, 2003; Gullette, 2004; Laz, 2003; Tulle, 2008; Twigg, 2004). This is particularly so with regard to the work of Katz (2011) and his thoughts on embodied aging as a perspective that locates aging bodies in the nexus between physical, biographical, and cultural realms.

Our suggestions find support from a number of sources. For example, Katz (2011) makes a strong case for the development of a conversation between those working in aging studies and body studies, and we would add criminology, as part of an interdisciplinary task of bring aging bodies back into critical focus. Support can also be found in Rocque's (2014) call for theoretical integration across disciplines and the need to develop a multifaceted concept of aging and maturation as biological, psychological and social processes that operate interactively to influence desistance at the individual and group level. Of course, actualizing our suggestions and those of Katz and Roque in practice is no easy task and present a number of challenges for researchers to grapple with in the future if the role of the aging body in the process of desistance is to be better understood than it currently is.

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